

THE CONCEPT OF HEALING AND THE IMPORTANCE OF A HEALING SPACE IN THE DYING PROCESS

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*'Empathy heals the individual at the same time that it heals the world.
It is the sister of compassion and the child of unconditional love'*

~ Weiss: 2004

Healing as a concept, has multifarious manifestations and can be applied to a broad range of modalities and situations and, within each one, subjective interpretations often dictate its meaning. The concept of healing is almost impossible to encapsulate in one descriptor as healing can occur on even the most subtle and unobservable levels and when least or not expected. The original meaning of the word *healing* comes from the old-English term *haelen*, meaning 'wholeness' and refers to the process of moving toward a desired wholeness or achievement of cohesion (Firth et al: 2015). If we accept the premise that the original meaning of the word healing is inextricably linked to wholeness then it makes sense to determine what wholeness represents and investigate all the elements which contribute to wholeness otherwise we do not know in totality how healing applies.

The Free Dictionary describes the state of wholeness as: 'being not divided or disjoined. Not wounded, injured or impaired. Sound or unhurt. An entity or system made up of interrelated parts.' The Biblical definition is: 'The state of being perfectly well in body, soul (mind, will and emotions) and spirit.' The World Health Organization defines wholeness as: 'A state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.' So in effect, when we talk about healing, we are applying the process to any state of being which detracts from the unity or aggregate of body mind and soul – the totality of an individual - which in Gestalten terms suggests that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. And quite rightly so, as humans our need for healing expands beyond our contingent parts. So, the concept of healing and

the use of healing practices are predicated on the basis that there is a condition or conditions presenting where actions are necessary to facilitate healing. Healing is the operative term when there is an apparent or perceived wounding or suffering in oneself or in ones relationship to the external world. If there were ever such an existence as

complete wholeness, there wouldn't be any necessity for healing.

Human Beings are complex and perplexing and we possess the ability to enact free will, which sets us apart from other species. This means that the physical expression of our selves is not just a result of a number of biological reactions – we are also affected by a series of lifelong choices that are based upon years of repetitive thoughts and feelings. We are not just a product of our genetics and the environment; we are the result of our choices, responses and reactions to every experience and every event, which has occurred over a lifetime (Firth et al: 2015). According to Firth et al, healing is an activation of a repair or recovery process occurs which occurs in response to a defect, disruption, disharmony, or malfunctioning. They state as an example that physiological healing is a response to a biological injury or imbalance, but the injury may lead to mental disruption expressed by swift mood changes, difficulty concentrating, and anxiety as seen in the transition from acute pain associated with injury to chronic pain. Further, they see the human condition as one of brokenness and therefore they believe that healing occurs naturally all of the time.

'By becoming aware that our lives are a continual process of healing, we can learn to come to peace with any illness or injury that may manifest.' (P187: 2015)

The concept of healing is relevant in a wide range of disciplines, including medicine, nursing, psychology, public health, education, religion, and spirituality. Healing occurs in multiple dimensions - physical, mental, emotional, spiritual, familial, social, communal, and environmental. It is an intervention, an outcome, and a process, and at times, all three. It also describes an ability or power, energy, and cleansing of grief, trouble, or evil. Healing occurs at multiple

levels from the micro level, as in cellular wound healing, to the macro level, as in national and global healing. Healing originates from within the individual and from external sources (e.g., human healers and God) or substances (e.g., herbs and medicines). Perspectives on healing come from health-care practitioners, patients, religious leaders, spiritual healers, people close to death, people living with pain and other chronic illnesses, people who have suffered abuse and neglect, and those who have suffered hardship such as divorce, miscarriage, or death of a child (Firth et al: 2015).

In everyday life it sometimes comes as a surprise that some level of healing has occurred. Yes, healing can occur in an unpredictable and surreptitious manner – despite best intentions or, lack thereof. The sort of healing I am talking about here - is 'lay'²

healing – in other words – it is not specific to a medical or psychological condition or a professional setting and it cannot be distinguished from any contributing emotional and spiritual variables. For example, one sentence in a brief conversation can have enough effect to facilitate a healing process in an individual who is receptive and subjectively interprets its value. Or, sitting attentively listening without interrupting – holding the space for someone to fully express his/her thoughts and feelings - can have a profound healing effect for the talker – and even sometimes for the listener. And how does one experience this healing? Often times it is not immediately noticed by the individual – other times it comes like an epiphany – and then there are times when others notice marked changes in an individual who has not yet noticed those changes in themselves. Often times, we know that healing has taken place when we notice a marked reduction in our suffering. The sophistication of our brain, our intelligence and thought processes is a double-edged sword with which we can either ameliorate our problems, or create and contribute to further suffering. Often, we err on the side of creating more suffering as we lack discipline of mind or easily become overwhelmed. Therefore it is almost inherent to being human that due to this propensity to suffer – for various reasons - we require consistent and regular recovery, repair and healing.

‘I teach suffering, its origin, cessation and path. That's all I teach’

~ Gautama Buddha: Circa 400BCE

The Buddha, who is often compared to a physician, taught a method of healing our innate suffering. In the original teachings of Buddha, we have the concept of the Four Noble Truths. In the first two Noble Truths he diagnosed the problem (suffering) and identified its cause. The third Noble Truth is the realisation that there is a cure or, essentially, the healing. The fourth Noble Truth, in which the Buddha set out the Eightfold Path, is the prescription – the way to wholeness - the way to release suffering – or, the ultimate healing – to bring us back to our essential selves – to make us whole. Essentially, the fourth Noble Truth is a way to heal through self-discipline and predominantly, mind discipline. Generally speaking, our natural state of being lacks a certain discipline of mind – an inability to control our responses, reactions and emotions so that we are not unbalanced or debilitated by them. Hence, when we are faced with adversity, illness or the prospect of dying, we are often overwhelmed, worried and conflicted. We often lack the tools to cope with such situations and in order to restore a state of equanimity, acceptance or peace; we need healing in whatever guise is appropriate.

To make us whole – to engender unity, comfort and peace - healing involves repair and recovery in multiple dimensions. Healing can encompass repair and recovery³

at the emotional, psychological, social, and spiritual levels, such as when an assault victim overcomes intense anxiety and moral distress. Spiritual repair as described by Kubler-Ross is when 'the spiritual quadrant opens and matures' and can be seen in the amputee who overcomes anger and blame by making a commitment to use the negative experience to help other amputees. Repair and recovery of mind, body, and spirit are what differentiates *healing* from *cure*. When people are cured, their disease or disease symptoms are physically eradicated, but they may or may not repair or recover in other areas. Healing, on the other hand, involves repair and recovery in all aspects of the physical, psychic and spiritual person: in other words, healing is concerned with wholeness for the total person (Firth et al: 2015). In a nutshell description

healing is a holistic, transformative process of repair and recovery in mind, body, and spirit resulting in a greater sense of ease, a reduction of suffering, a step towards wholeness, ease of mind and inner peace. This healing transformation is not dependant upon a correlation with illness, any physical complaint, a cure or any external imperative.

'Deep listening and loving speech are profound medicine. Being truly present is profound medicine.' ~ Sister Dang Nghiem: 2015

In *Mindfulness As Medicine*, Vietnamese Buddhist Nun, Sister Dang Nghiem relates that it is the quality of our presence that makes people feel cared for and that is healing in and of itself. She says that when we are not present, focused and mindful, we can cause more damage than good to the people we serve. Therefore it's very important for anyone - a doctor or a lawyer or a social worker - to be fully present, relaxed, and calm in his/her body, anchored in the breathing and in the body so that he/she can practice loving speech and deep listening. The more present we are with ourselves, the more present we can be for others, and the more we can be of service.

So, it follows that to be fully present we need to create the conditions and the environment through which we can best manifest this state of being. To that end and as far as possible – regardless of circumstances – we need to create the conditions that will best foster the possibility of healing. It could be argued that a healing space is a state of mind or a state of presence offered by the practitioner to the healee. This is a state of being not dependant on aesthetics or the physical environment. It is a healing space created by the thoughts and energy of the facilitator - be it a therapy room, a waiting room, a corridor, a hospital bed, a palliative care room or a home hospice. Contrary to popular belief, décor does little to promote healing. It can give a sense of peace or

relaxation but there is no paint colour, wall hanging or ornament that can counteract the effect of a person that cannot be present (Brodie: 2015). Shamanic practitioner Simon

Buxton describes a healing space as: '*a protected physical and emotional space in which the transforming work of healing takes place through learning and insight.*' The dominant paradigm describes the optimum healing space as being reliant on a state of being, a state of consciousness, which enables the healee to access, and engage their 'inner healer' and move towards wholeness, equanimity and peace. This state of consciousness is applicable regardless of the physical environment. To hold the space and be fully present is an intention, an attitude of bearing witness to whatever may unfold from the healee. Creating this space is one of the first steps to enabling the healing process. It is a space of trust, respect, compassion and non-judgement, which melds naturally with healing presence.

In *The Art of Being a Healing Presence*, James Miller states: 'Healing presence is the condition of being consciously and compassionately in the present moment with another or with others, believing in and affirming their potential for wholeness, wherever they are in life.' As Miller defines it, it's the simple act of being there for someone who is grieving or going through a difficult time and that means more than physically being there. There's a skilled way that a person can be there mentally, emotionally and spiritually for others. This also means to be comfortable within yourself - open, curious, and compassionate so you can be this way with others too - holding space for wholeness to emerge and for healing to happen. In her article, *Healing Presence*, Jan Lundy (2018), relates that deep listening is the first and most fundamental part of creating rapport to being of service as a true healing presence. Secondly, she sees that compassion - hearing without judgment, conditions, or stories - having the capacity to shape our beings into one another and letting the other person know they are not alone - is the language of the heart. It is true presence.

It is evident that healing and the resulting movement toward wholeness are individual processes and personal experiences unique to the individual and occurring within the life narrative of the person experiencing the phenomenon.

While a healthcare provider can evaluate objective data in order to determine if a5

person is 'cured,' only the individual can ultimately determine that healing has occurred. Hence, a consequence of healing is a uniquely subjective and personal realisation and perception of wholeness (Firth et al: 2015). As Victor Frankl so eloquently described in *Man's Search for Meaning*, 'suffering ceases to be suffering in some way, in the moment it finds a meaning.' Healing is also a by-product of meaning. The ultimate goal of healing is the realisation of wholeness - the integration of physical, emotional, intellectual, energy, and spiritual systems into a balanced and harmonious total being, the sum of which is greater than its individual parts. Wholeness is harmony of body, mind, and spirit. At the core of healing presence is the ability to respond rather than react to the emotions of others. To create healing presence, we become fully present, fine-tuning our inner experience to the inner state of the other person. We transform ourselves in response to the basic needs of the person we are trying to heal and to help. Ultimately, we find within ourselves the psychological and spiritual resources required to nourish and to empower the other human being. The concept of healing, as it incorporates an empathic healing presence within a safe and trustworthy space, is one of the most valuable offerings that one human being can give to another.

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